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ABSTRACT

Research on children and media has generally focused on the negative impact of media on developing minds. However, a theoretical framework is proposed for thinking about the role of television for American children from a developmental perspective. Instead of focusing on television's effects, television viewing can be examined as is any other childhood activity--as a constant series of interactions with social, cultural, and personal information that lead to a child becoming a functioning member of society. It is one activity, not necessarily the major activity, of childhood. However, the set of interactions with television can be examined as a dominant activity of American childhood and adolescence. (A dominant activity, long a theme in Soviet cognitive psychology, is composed of a set of tasks that are common to most children in a particular culture.) Television qualifies as a dominant activity because most American children participate in television viewing; there is a consistency in the social values it portrays; considerable effort is involved in understanding its symbol systems; and because certain sets of behavioral or cognitive outcomes have been linked to television viewing. A four-page reference list is included. (Author/LMM)

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Television viewing as a dominant activity of childhood: A suggestion for a developmental effects theory

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework for thinking, from a developmental perspective, about the role of television for American children. We do not attempt to review the literature about effects; many such reviews are available for the interested scholar. Rather we propose that television viewing be viewed as any other activity of childhood is viewed - a constant series of interactions with social, cultural, and personal information that lead to the child becoming a functioning member of society. Children choose to take part in the television experience just as they choose to take part in all the other activities of childhood. It is one activity - not necessarily the major activity - of childhood. We propose here to examine the set of "interactions" with television as a dominant activity (Leont'ev, 1972; Wertsch, 1979; Wertsch, 1981) of American childhood and adolescence. A dominant activity - long a theme in Soviet cognitive psychology - is composed of a set of tasks that are common to most children in a particular culture. By viewing the television setting in this way, we can diminish the mythology of effects (ie. children are hypnotized, become hyperactive, or are immediately tempted to behave aggressively); taking such an approach also allows us to suggest a more coherent research agenda.

Television viewing as a dominant activity of childhood: A suggestion for a developmental effects theory

Research work on children and media has a relatively rich tradition in communication. In general this work has focussed on the negative impact of such media on developing minds. Do comic books have harmful impacts on children (Muhlen, 1949; Wertham, 1954)? Does exposure to films have negative effects on thoughts and behaviors of children (Holaday & Stoddard, 1933; Peterson & Thurstone, 1933; Dysinger & Ruckmick, 1933; Blumer, 1933; Blumer & Hauser, 1933). Will watching television cause children to become aggressive (Comstock, Rubinstein, & Murray, 1972; Pearl, 1982), hypnotized, less-imaginative (Mander, 1979), or significantly less-verbal, and addicted to visual images (Winn, 1977)?

After over 30 years of research work it is becoming clear that, (a) questions about media impact on children - indeed on adults - are not as simple to answer as they are to ask, and (b) the methods we have used to answer the questions have not provided answers that are adequate for a majority of social scientists or the general public.

While we might debate endlessly about our responsibilities to answer questions for the "general public" we cannot deny that there is no acceptable answer, for example, to the question "What impact does television have on our children?". Witness the recent debate between industry researchers (ABC Social Research Unit, 1983; Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp, & Rubens, 1982) and social scientists (Walsh, 1983; Cook, Kendzierski, & Thomas, 1983) on the meanings of the myriad findings of the television and aggression research. One side presents experimental evidence supporting its position, while the other side proceeds to criticize the findings based on issues of methodology and procedure. These roles then reverse. The general public remains unsure of the "truth" throughout. Such confusion has been evident at least since the publication of the initial report of the U.S. Surgeon General on the impact of television (Comstock, et al., 1972), when newspaper headlines often carried messages of opposite interpretations (Rubinstein, 1980).

Why do we have such difficulty in specifying the role played by mass media in the lives of our children? One reason might be the overemphasis on looking for negative effects.[1] Indeed as a result of an extensive focus on harmful impacts of media, proportionally little is known about the overall positive impact of media - television in particular (cf. Wartella & Reeves, 1982). Another reason might be a

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[1]An exception to the negative effects model was represented by two volumes that appeared during the late 1950's and early 1960's (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961). These authors attempted to describe the role that the new medium played in the lives of British and American children. What activities did it replace? What new activities, social or individual, did television seem to occasion? How might the activity of television viewing be though of as a meaningful experience in development?

lack of a good developmental theory that would allow us to predict the kinds of effects - both positive and negative - that media are likely to have on children. While communication is blessed with a few theories about media effects on their publics, or audiences (needs and gratifications, for example, or those of selected and indirect impact), these approaches do not incorporate attention to developmental issues. Such a glaring void might be likened to psychology having a theory of cognition without attending to cognitive development.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework for thinking, from a developmental perspective, about the role of television for American children. I do not attempt to review the literature about effects; many such reviews are available for the interested scholar. Rather I propose that television viewing be examined as any other activity of childhood is examined - a constant series of interactions with social, cultural, and personal information that lead to the child becoming a functioning member of society. Children choose to take part in the television experience just as they choose to take part in all the other activities of childhood (cf. Rice & Wartella, 1981). It is one activity - not necessarily the major activity - of childhood. However, I do suggest that television viewing be considered as a dominant activity (Leont'ev, 1981; Wertsch, 1979; Wertsch, 1981) of American childhood and adolescence. A dominant activity - long a theme in Soviet cognitive psychology - is composed of a set of tasks that are common to most children in a particular culture. The effect of a dominant activity is to ensure cultural stability by subjecting societal members to a structured form of homogeneous experiences. It is based on the belief that responses - behavioral and cognitive - built over long periods become internalized and used to guide information processing and social behavior.

Only a few dominant activities were identified by early theorists, ranging from infants' direct physical/emotional contact with adults to formal education. This paper argues that exposure to and use of television can be considered within the framework of a dominant activity of modern American society. As with other dominant activities, there are certain predictable consequences of television viewing on cognitive and behavioral development. By conceiving of the American child's television experiences as representing a dominant activity, it is reasonably easy to make sense of the wide variety of research literature now available.

This is so for several reasons. In this approach, since media are interpreted as operating within the context of contemporary society, their impact is determined in conjunction with their social role. Therefore, research as diverse as "micro" studies on attention and comprehension can be placed side by side with those of a more "macro" approach, such as studies relating television to aggressive behaviors, irrational fears (cultivation analysis), or stereotyped attitudes. All findings can be examined and interpreted in terms of how the child uses television within his or her own experiences. Television viewing is seen - not as a passive endeavor - but as part of the social environment that the child chooses to "interact" with, at the expense of other activities. This relates to the second reason for the diverse findings

integrating well when seen in the context of a dominant activity. Research results, particularly those from laboratory studies, are placed within the context of the child's real-world experience; they are required to be, conceptually, externally valid. For example, if nothing else in a child's environment would support the display of inappropriate aggressive behavior, we must believe that it is highly unlikely that only exposure to violent episodes on television will create such behavior.

Internalization

It has been argued that any comprehensive approach to examining the role of media in society, and consequent effects on thought and behavior, must necessarily proceed from a critical perspective (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1977; Lazarsfeld, 1941). That is, theory concerning the media should be couched within the contexts of the social systems in which the media operate - how they affect either change or justification of the social order, and how they in turn are effected by economic, political, and social structures. The logic behind this suggestion seems exceedingly clear: media operate within institutional constraints. These institutional constraints - economic, social, political - determine to a large degree what media use will "look like" in a particular culture, and consequently what the results of media use are likely to be.

This approach is often associated with a Marxist critique of media and their role in society. It stems from interpretations of Marx's thoughts about human consciousness and the role played by "external" social forces to the development of this consciousness (cf. Smelser, 1973). Marx argued that many of the external forces at work in human society aid in determining many of our "internally" held beliefs --- class concepts, moral values, for example. Thus our internalized sets of beliefs initially derive from socially-defined activities. Marx argued for the undeniable social basis of consciousness - suggesting that in fact consciousness cannot exist without being "burdened" by the social constraints of forces such as language. He noted that:

> "Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men, and for that reason is really beginning to exist for me personally as well; for language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men... (c)onsciousness is therefore from the beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all." (Smelser, 1973, p. 10)

Marx, who lived from 1818 to 1883, was never able to extend his ideas to the social construction aspects of electronic mass media. Indeed the structure and function of mass media during his time was considerably different from the modern-day structure of the Western media. Nonetheless, Marx's theoretical arguments still seem pertinent in this day of instantaneous transmission of words, pictures, ideas, and cultures.

Activity and dominant activities

Developing from this macro-Marxist approach was an approach that might be thought of as micro-Marxist. It is represented by over 60 years of research efforts, mostly in the Soviet Union,[2] dedicated to

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[2]Soviet scholars represented by such research include

describing the process of internalization of social realities. Minute processes such as conditioned reflexes, attention, perception, memory, and language have all served as foci for the theoretical and research efforts. The goal, it seems, has been to define a finite number of activities that take place in children's experiences and that are crucial to developing cognitive skills and socially-valued behaviors. These activities alternately call upon and develop increasingly sophisticated skills as children take part in them. For example, the learning of language is dependent on several activities; these range from the early situations in which the parents use language to direct attention of the child, to their use for control of behavior, to eventual internalization and use by the child to control his/her own behaviors (see Wertsch, 1979).

Thus the "micro" concept of activity appears to stem from "macro-Marxist" philosophy. In both cases the notion is that external social forces contribute to shaping structure and function - in one case it is the means of production shaping social relationships, while in the other case it is social interactions shaping cognition. Indeed the psychological concept of activity seems to spring from concerted efforts by Soviet psychology - following the 1919 counter-revolution - to incorporate theoretical Marxism into principles of human behavior. Vygotsky for example, in tracing the development of speech and language, quoted directly from Marx's works (cf. Vygotsky, 1934). This incorporation of theory into conceptualizations of psychological functioning was probably not politically forced; rather it stemmed from an accepted conviction that Marx had located not only essential principles of human social organization, but human cognition as well.

By providing sets of activities in which children participate, society both defines important issues, events, and values, and insures practice in developing socially-valued behaviors and thoughts. Internalization of language, and development of social attitudes and morals, occurs as children take part in cultural activities. By structuring the teaching aspects - both intended and unintended - of society so that most members experience a select few of these activities, a society insures continuation.

This is because the structure of the activities, and often the representations of the activities themselves, become internalized and used to guide further interactions. In explaining the intricacies of Vygotsky's notions of the internalization process based on activities, Ivanov - a semiotician - has written:

> "Man cannot govern his own behavior directly and creates signs in order to control it indirectly. The history of culture can be described to a great extent as the transmission in time of sign

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L.S. Vygotsky, A.R. Luria, A.N. Leont'ev, A.A. Leont'ev, D.B. El'konin, P.Ya. Gal'perin, A.N. Sokolov, O.K. Tikhomirov, V.P. Zinchenko, and P.I. Zinchenko. A small group of American scholars have recently explored issues of cognition from a classic Soviet "developmental" perspective; these include M. Cole, H. Pick, and J. Wertsch.

> systems serving to control behavior. Semiotic systems for the programmed control of human behavior are elaborated due to the internalization of external signs, a process that can be traced most distinctly to the emergence of internal speech" (Ivanov, 1977).

The focus of Vygotsky and his followers was on identifying a few selected activities that seemed common to most children in particular societies. These few, prescribed activities that all experience - and that lead to internalization - have been referred to as dominant activities. Most dominant activities have their own unique set of tasks; completion of these allows for experiencing and learning the relevant system of signs that accompany such activities. These tasks are very well-specified, and it is obvious that such tasks lead to a concrete set of behavioral and cognitive skills. Wertsch (1979), summarizing El'konin (1972), has provided a list of activities generally accepted as dominant. This is presented in Table 1.

While there has been some disagreement over the exact specifications of an activity and a dominant activity (cf. Wertsch, 1981), we can here summarize what seem to be general requirements for a dominant activity:

1. An dominant activity must be one in which most, if not all, children in a society are exposed to - or take part in.

2. Additionally, the content of the activity must carry important information regarding living in the particular culture.

3. The activity must, through its form, or sign system, require certain kinds of decoding skills.

4. There must be a certain set of possible outcomes that can be identified as being causally linked to the activity.

Not only do the individual dominant activities change during development, but the activities that are considered to be dominant may also change across the course of cultural history (Wertsch, 1979). There were dominant activities in societies prior to the advent of formal schooling - playing with peers, for example. Formal schooling probably came to be considered as a dominant activity only after it was obvious that schooling had important cognitive and behavioral consequences. In some cultures, where formal schooling is not present, it is of course not a dominant activity of childhood. Children from such cultures also do not demonstrate many of the cognitive skills that children from schooled societies demonstrate (Scribner & Cole, 1981).

The identification of a few activities as dominant does not mean however that all impacts of such activities will necessarily be homogeneous. Some effects of each activity are likely to be shared: formal schooling thus might increase all children's attention to perceptual features of tasks while decreasing their attention to irrelevant aspects (Greenfield, 1966). However, some of the

Table 1

Periods, stages, and dominant activities of childhood[1]

Period	Stage	Dominant activity
Early childhood	infancy	direct emotional contact with parents
	early childhood	practical experience with objects and environments
Childhood	preschool	play and role-playing
	early school	formal education and structured learning experiences
Adolescence	early adolescence	establishing intimate personal relationships with peers
	later adolescence	vocational and career-oriented activities

[1]From Wertsch, 1979.

interactional aspects of formal schooling might result in some children being continually rewarded for academic performance while others are either not rewarded or punished for their performance. Thus it is not necessarily a requirement that a dominant activity always have identical impacts in all areas of social and cognitive activity.

Television viewing as a dominant activity

Proceeding from the criteria set earlier for a dominant activity, it appears as if "the television experience" (Winnick & Winnick, 1979) may qualify as a major dominant activity of American childhood.

First, (1) it is an activity in which most American children

participate. From birth the child is exposed to a television set, usually in the family living room or recreation room. While there is some evidence that infants as young as six months (Hollenbeck & Slaby, 1979) recognize and respond to the combined audio-visual stimulation from the set, few children develop interest in watching the content of the medium until the age of two to two-and-one-half years (Anderson & Lorch, 1983). Children are able to understand some of television's messages much earlier than they do those from other media. Alternately, they also misunderstand many televised messages, since such information is presented before children have developed the cognitive skills for complete comprehension. For some children, the television supplements information available elsewhere. For others it replaces access to such information. The medium teaches, it occupies time, it entertains, it informs. Indeed, it fulfils many of the same functions as do other dominant activities, but it does so, in different ways, throughout childhood and adolescence.

For children in some families, the set is on continuously. Parents and siblings spend evening hours in front of the screen, watching news during dinner and then viewing the network offerings during prime time. Some families use the occasion as one for much socializing while others use it to avoid interaction (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Lull, 1980; Bolz, 1983). Some parents, particularly those home during the day, watch morning variety or talk shows, and afternoon "soaps." Thus many children see the television as an integral component to a person's entire day. In other families the set may be controlled much more carefully. Shows for viewing are selected by certain criteria, usually by all family members. In such settings most viewing is probably not of network situation comedy or drama but rather public broadcast presentations, or programming that would be considered "cultured" or educational.

Thus it is clear that amount of exposure, and type of programming, is highly varied, based on certain family or environmental characteristics. While there are indices that allow us to generalize about exposure - such as socioeconomic status, race, age, and occupation, some degree of variety is the rule rather than the exception. This will be especially true with increasing penetration of cable television. The point here is that the family usually controls what programming the child sees at least during early childhood. This control, if it is strict, communicates to the child that television viewing is a positive activity only when done in moderation. This control, when loose, will provide significantly different messages to the child about television viewing as an activity. But whatever the content of the controlling message might be, the focus is on the medium of television. Few modern American families are without at least one working set; each member of the family may use it differently, but it does get used.

Based on perspectives provided by parents, and by general changes in interests with development, the functions television serves for children change in identifiable ways (Comstock, et al., 1978; Cojuc & Watkins, 1982). Initially, preschoolers prefer cartoons and programs adjusted to their relatively short attention commitments - the actions

are simple and the sounds and sights salient. With age, the meanings of the portrayals become more important; children begin to prefer programs with plots, particularly situation comedies, but variety programs also maintain their interest. Finally, seemingly accompanying their entry into adolescence, their preferences change to more serious programming, particularly drama and action-drama. Elsewhere (Cojuc & Watkins, 1982) it has been argued that one of the reasons for this shift is that they now search out televised portrayals to furnish them with information about what the adult world is like - what will they be doing when they grow up. To this end they seek a variety of presentations, within a particular genre of program type - such as dramas or soaps. However, variety of exposure to different programs may not always indicate variety in terms of information content (cf. Schiller, 1973).

That is, (2) there is considerable consistency in the social values portrayed within the media messages received through television. While the type of content viewed may vary with a number of significant demographic predictors, there is clearly some information that all children might be exposed to. For example, it has been argued by some (Barcus, 1983; Greenberg, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Neudendorf, & Atkin, 1980) that the content of children's (and adult fictional) programs is highly repetitive and stereotyped. This argument of course has long been advanced, and is documented by a variety of content analytic approaches. Others (Gitlin, 1980) have also asserted that the type of information presented by the major news organizations is surprising similar in both political flavor and selection of stories. With few exceptions - usually foreign imports - comedy programs, drama shows, and variety programs are all Hollywood- or New York-produced, and thus flavored with similar characters, similar skits and plots, and similar social values. Thus Gerbner and his colleagues can claim that television programming presents information about the dominant power structure of society to its viewers, and that this information leads in some cases to cultivating and reinforcing expectations about the nature of the world (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1981). Whether this cultivation interpretation is correct, or whether the major news organizations present highly similar points of view, is not the focus of this paper. Nonetheless, there is substantial evidence that while television is touted as the medium of almost unending variety - much of the content of the programming is, and many of the social values displayed - even in news, documentary, and educational programming - are, highly repetitive and differentiated only on superficial levels.[3]

Additionally, much of the information presented through the medium serves to reinforce concepts already being developed in the child - the roles of men and women in society, or the value placed on particular occupations or political stances. It is important to examine this role

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[3]Alternative viewpoints are of course readily available (cf. Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983). Several have argued that television does in fact present much non-standard fare. Novel information is sometimes available, but often given the politics of commercial television (Gitlin, 1979, this is the exception and not the rule.

played by television, as it interacts with information available to the child from other sources. As seems reasonable, those children who rely on television for most information hold quite different conceptions of their environments than do children who have a variety of information sources available to them (Comstock, et al., 1978). The concept of stereotyped information is particularly of concern with the viewing habits of adolescents, whose viewing drastically diminishes after age 12, but becomes much more homogeneous and selective. Evidence exists for example that children report heavy use of Love Boat and Dallas to learn how to develop opposite-sex relationships (Cojuc & Watkins, 1982). Watching the same kinds of programs will ensure an even greater homogeneity of beliefs and values.

Additionally, (3) there is considerable effort involved in understanding the symbol systems of television. While children begin watching television around 2.5 years, the process of learning to watch takes several more years. It involves, for the most part, learning the formats of the kinds of programs, learning which will be understandable and which will not, which will be entertaining and which will not. To accomplish this requires a good deal of cognitive sophistication, and a good deal of experience with the medium of television. Children thus develop cognitive skills in learning and decoding a novel sign system; this sign system probably carries more information, at least for younger viewers, in a strict sense, than other other sign system they will encounter - even more than writing. Young children learn that the variety of visual and audio techniques that are initially salient and stimulating also are used to carry meaningful plot information. These formal features (Rice, Huston, & Wright, 1983) serve as syntactic and semantic markers for the children, denoting change - introduction of new scenes and characters - plot development - such as swelling music or rapid action - and often continuity - such as familiar sound effects or themes. With age and experience with the medium of television, children come to learn which of these features are simply perceptually salient, which are informative in terms of program meaning, and which are both salient and informative. For example, very young children are not likely to attend to the set during long periods of dialogue. The words are often meaningless and the action is too slow to maintain interest. However, with age and experience, they learn that much of the important plot information is carried by dialogue; thus they begin to attend longer to such periods. Indeed, even very young children (around 5 years) who have extensive experience with television will watch more during dialogue periods than will children of the same age who have little experience. In a similar way, children increasingly come to rely on language to make the world comprehensible. Thus language achieves very important status for children, both on television and in their non-TV experiences (Rice, 1983).

As might be expected, the process of comprehension of television material also requires time and medium experience. Children at age eight understand more than do children at age five; those at age 12 understand more than younger children. Again, as would be expected, much of the development of this comprehension parallels the development of understanding of real-life events. For example, young children often misunderstand television characters' motives, intentions, and feelings -

just as they have trouble inferring similar motives and feelings of people with whom they interact in their own experience. Indeed, the understanding of "television people" does not seem to differ significantly from their understanding of persons in their own experiences. In cases where it has been shown to differ, it appears as if TV may provide a few more cues about characters than are available in reality (Dorr, Doubleday, & Kovaric, 1983). These cues of course are helpful only to the extent that the child is able to decode the presentation and infer the meanings of such cues.

Young learners must also be able to comprehend television's ability to transcend time and space, within seconds. During a time when they are developing their own concepts of time, they are faced with a medium with an ability to present material temporally ordered, or hopelessly (from their perspective) jumbled. Additionally, many switches between places - near and far - and characters, must be understood and placed in proper perspective before full comprehension is possible. This often means that only obvious parts of program plots are understood, while the more subtle aspects remain undetected for years. As an example, try to watch the perennial favorite, the Wizard of Oz, from a child's perspective. Many viewers do not realize, until adulthood, the relationship between the program characters, or the use of dream sequences.

Finally, of course, (4) there are certain sets of behavioral or cognitive outcomes that have been causally linked[4] to television viewing. For example, it is not possible to discuss television viewing as an activity without addressing the issue of learning behavior - particularly aggressive behavior - from the medium. Again, for the interested reader, reviews of the the aggression effects literature are prevalent (cf. Palmer & Dorr, 1980; Stein & Friedrich, 1975). Television is unique in that - in contrast to other media - it presents information based on sequences of observable actions. As an audio-visual medium, it is uniquely equipped to rely on the visual images to carry much of the meaning. This is as true of a Public Broadcasting Service special on science as it is a commercial situation-comedy or action-drama. Many of these televised behaviors seen by very young children, in particular behaviors on programs designed for young children, are simple and easy to copy. They are gross motor activities - such as running, jumping, fighting - all behaviors that are coded motorically. This is of course the child's major way of coding during preschool years; thus while it may be difficult to code television plot information verbally, it is exceedingly easy to copy the behaviors seen on the screen. Left without any other environmental influences, it is highly likely that a child will learn substantial amounts of aggressive - or at least highly active - behavior from television. However, most children exist in a environment where such behavior is not sanctioned; thus while the actions might be coded, they are never reproduced. There are simply too many social sanctions against aggression in present society. This may help explain research findings that demonstrate only

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[4]Often accompanied, however, with counter-arguments based on disagreements with theory or methodology.

children initially high on aggressive behavior will learn additional aggression from television (Stein & Friedrich, 1975). Alternately, prosocial behaviors, such as cooperation and empathy, are not coded as easily, but may be eventually learned by most children, even those not initially "high" on prosocial behavior.

Television does not however simply provide behavioral models for young viewers. It is also a rich source of factual information. Indeed, since the advent of Sesame Street in 1969, many of the functions originally served by kindergarten and even the first grade have been now served by a program that children may view from the comfort of their own homes. Letter recognition, number concepts, even early reading skills, are now developed much earlier than they were even 20 years ago. New information, not available elsewhere, may be presented through the medium; an inner-city child, who has never ventured beyond her 10-block area, can see the animals of Africa, or the day in the life of a rural farm child. It is not immediately clear however just how far-reaching the impact of this enrichment might be. It is clear that, besides enhancing cognitive development, it does serve to bring the child closer to the McLuhan-esque "global village." It is probably too early to see any major impact of this increased awareness on children; massive changes in ethnocentrism (as with egocentrism) take a good deal of time. Perhaps effects will become apparent as children reared with Sesame Street and similar programs reach adulthood. As the use of the medium as teacher has increased, so too has the theorizing about its educational processes (Kozma, 1984) and the wealth of data regarding its educational effects (Johnston, 1984; Johnston & Ettema, 1982). The majority of the theorizing and the research indicate that television is an extremely effective teacher - but of both intended and unintended information. The combination of time spent with the medium, amount of material presented, and level of repetition, essentially guarantees that television's messages, like those of society's elders, will be rehearsed and eventually learned.

Thus television viewing is undoubtedly a meaningful activity of childhood. It serves often different functions, for different children, at different times during development. It provides models for behavior, both pro- and anti-social; it provides a wealth of information about different aspects of the world for the young viewer - information often not available elsewhere. Additionally, it educates the child about the values of the dominant culture. In contrast to other dominant activities (as presented in Table 1), television viewing is an activity throughout childhood and adolescence (and perhaps into adulthood, too). With other activities, the change in the interaction between the person and the activity comes from without. For example, as infants grow too large for constant holding and physical contact with the adult, other activities take over as dominant. With television, though, the change in the interaction comes from the child, and is based primarily on changes in cognitive and social sophistication. Thus it might be argued that to speak of "television viewing" as an activity is actually an error. One is actually speaking about various "television viewings" that occur with periods in development.

Of course, during no period does viewing occur in a social vacuum.

Other activities of childhood and adolescence have moderating or qualifying influences on its effects. This moderating influence does not necessarily diminish the importance of television viewing, as an activity, for the modern American child. It simply underscores the need for taking a realistic look at how modern children use television. Only in this way will we completely understand the impact of this ubiquitous medium.

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